

## JUDGING THE AMERICAN COCKER SPANIEL

Having awarded CC's in American Cocker thirteen times in twenty four years, including Crufts, I am still learning. Despite what some might think, you will never know everything.

I don't believe that anyone goes into a judging appointment telling themselves 'I am determined to make a real hash of this' – but sometimes one makes judgements which are later regretted. Isn't that true of life generally, but there is always something to be learned from every experience. I always advise novice judges to watch others when they are doing the honours and pick up points, both good and bad. Sometimes you can come away only having learned how not to do something. That is often as good a lesson as something positive.

As far as the American Cocker is concerned, the key word in everything to do with the breed is '*moderation*'. Initially it is a breed which strikes you as beautiful in both coat and presentation. However, it is certainly not just a result of the coiffeur's skill. It remains primarily a Gundog with the ability and inclination to do a job of work. It is a dog of substance and character, not weak, nor lightweight, nor of a suspect temperament. It is certainly not a 'pin-headed' dog like some examples of the breed you may come across, but one with sufficient skull and strength of jaw to be able to pick up game when asked. A Gundog unable to hold a candy canary in its mouth is of no use to anybody.

In general appearance, the American Cocker should be serviceable, have a refined skull and subtle chiselling to the foreface, be well boned, compact and sturdily built. It should have wide, muscular quarters and be well balanced throughout. In character it needs to be merry and keen to work. Most well bred Americans are of this temperament. Any sign of bad nature needs to be discarded quickly as it has no place in the breed.

The head & skull shape is most important. It needs to be nicely rounded on top (not flat or domed), with a clear stop. The distance from the tip of the nose to the stop must be half that from the stop to the occipital protuberance. There needs to be clean chiselling on the foreface around the eye sockets. The muzzle must be broad and deep, with a strong jaw and a perfect scissor bite. Do not accept any of the nonsense spoken about bites other than complete scissor. If it is not a scissor bite, it is not acceptable in this breed.

The top of the ears need to be in line with the lower part of the eye and long enough to extend to the nostrils. A long, clean neck is important to enable it to pick up from the ground if required to do so. This is a Gundog and needs to be able to function as such.

As far as the body is concerned, it needs to be well ribbed with a short coupling and strong over the loin. Roughly speaking, the body of an American Cocker is square when measuring from the withers to the ground and from the withers to the set on of tail. It is certainly never long and low.

One important feature that is often misinterpreted is that of the sloping topline in the breed. The key is that the slope is 'slight' from withers to set on of tail. We are not talking Eddie the Eagle here! Some people seem to think that the more acute the slope, the better the dog. This is complete nonsense. A slight slope differentiates the breed from others, and in a good specimen it is maintained naturally when standing and when on the move. A clever handler will try to con the judge by pulling the rear legs back to exaggerate the slope when standing. In my view, this is not only cruel to the dog but a complete waste of time because when the dog moves off it will display

its topline for all to see and nothing a clever handler can do will alter it. A top quality American Cocker on a loose lead is a joy to behold when moving. If it has to be strung up on a lead when going around, there is usually something amiss and it is up to the judge to spot it. You could always ask them to go again on a loose lead!

The feet of the American are compact and tight (catlike), not spreading. The feet are the only bits which touch the ground so they need to be good, otherwise it is rather like driving a brand new car on bald tyres in the rain – it doesn't work! The movement is smooth, effortless and ground covering.

On the move the tail should appear to come straight off, and in line with, the topline. It does not have a Terrier tail. I have found that one advantage of undocked tails nowadays is that poor tail carriages are so obvious to spot, looking rather like animated flagpoles. Preferably they need to be carried straight off the back, not up in the air.

Colours and coats are the icing on the cake, not the cake itself! The standard gives the variations in colour and markings. The coat needs to be well feathered but not excessive, certainly not so much as to hide the true lines or impede movement. A judge needs to get his hands under dogs with an excess of coat. You might be surprised what you will – or will not- find.

As I said at the start, when judging the American Cocker the key word throughout is *'moderation'*. Avoid excessive exaggeration in all things and you won't go far wrong. Just remember, they don't get better the longer you look at them, so be positive, fair and do your very best. What more could any exhibitor – or dog –ask?

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